

Career Advice for Geniuses

Marty Nemko

You'd think that the supersmart have it made. Not so. Being highly intelligent comes with surprising workplace burdens, as I've learned during 20 years as a career coach specializing in intellectually gifted adults. Here are suggestions I've made that clients have found most helpful:

Confirm your capability. Most gifted adults wonder if they're really that smart. Well, check it out: take an intelligence (IQ) test. A high score can give you confidence that will last a lifetime. (130 is a widely used threshold score for giftedness.) Today, IQ tests are often disparaged, but a large body of rigorous research indicates that IQ is a valid measure of the ability to think in complex, abstract terms, and to learn quickly--critical attributes in school, work, and life. IQ isn't a perfect gauge; it doesn't measure drive or emotional intelligence, for example. But many studies, such as those by Linda Gottfredson of the University of Delaware, have found that IQ is the single best predictor of job performance.

Want to take an intelligence test? Go to www.mensa.org, the world's largest organization of intellectually gifted people.

Embrace your ability.. Many people try to hide their intelligence, even from themselves. Intelligence is a wonderful attribute. Certainly don't brag, but inside, feel good about it.

Use your intelligence well. As with all power, intellectual power is only admirable when used for positive purposes. What's the best way to use that great mind of yours? To try to cure a disease? Solve a social ill? Start a company that provides an important service? Even in small things, use your mind well. Help co-workers, neighbors, even strangers-problems that are impossible for others to solve are easy for you. Noblesse oblige.

Find kindred spirits. Many gifted people feel like outsiders. That's because they do think differently, more rigorously, than average people. Make the effort to find a job at a place that employs many brilliant people: top biotech companies, consulting firms, financial institutions, think tanks, law firms, and universities. However, avoid teaching except at elite universities. The gap between your intellect and your students' will frustrate you all.

Consider avocations likely to attract smart people book clubs, Mensa, groups that play intellectual games, for example, chess clubs, etc.

Trust yourself more than experts. (including me) Yes, consider experts' input, but don't automatically let their views trump yours. A consultant may recommend, for example, that your company convert to a new accounting system. Your gifted mind can

probably take into consideration many factors beyond what the consultant can. Reserve the final judgment for yourself.

You can afford to be a dabbler. Society denigrates them as "jacks of all tradmasters of none." True--but not for the intellectually gifted. Many of the brilliant people I know have significant accomplishments in multiple areas. Feel free to delve into a range of endeavors. Just monitor yourself to see that you are indeed accomplishing things.

If you're self-motivated, avoid school. Sure, that sounds controversial, but even elite colleges and graduate schools are designed for the bright but not brilliant. If you're a self-motivated learner, you'll probably learn more-and focus more on what you care about--by taking charge of your own learning. Read what you want to read, for instance, get mentored by those whom you respect, try out your learning with self-designed projects, etc. Self-teachers who describe their learning process to prospective employers are often hired over more conventional applicants, who required the handholding of school and whose learning is usually more theoretical and less relevant in the workplace.

Work with people whose minds match yours. If you work with weak co-workers or bosses, you'll be forced into a Hobson's Choice: intimidate them or stifle yourself. Normal people drive the gifted crazy. It's worth taking the time to seek out a workplace filled with smart people that you end up among your intellectual peers.

If you already work at a stifling job, but aren't ready to leave, try to brand yourself as The Brain while allowing others to save face. You might say something like, "I love trying to figure out the thorny problems. If you ever have one, I'd enjoy taking a crack at it."

Consider self-employment. Brilliant people often do well as consultants to high-level businesses, non-profits, and universities because those jobs requires the ability to quickly solve problems clients couldn't solve themselves, despite inside knowledge of their operation.

Beware of starting a business in which you try to create a new product. Success in such ventures depends on many factors beyond your control. Unless you have pockets deep enough to afford multiple failures, or are a genius at convincing others to fund you, you will likely end up broke, no matter how smart you are.

Resist calls for balance. Brilliant people find themselves driven to explore things deeply, often to the exclusion of "normal" things, like family time, a clean and neat house, watching TV, or going to parties. Embrace your intensity. Don't let people denigrate you as workaholic, or criticize you for lacking balance. What you are is productive. Other people may be jealous that they lack your drive and intellect.

Don't expect to be a genius all the time. Even geniuses sometimes want to goof around. And sometimes you simply won't be at your best. No matter how brilliant you are, you're also human. Allow yourself human failings.

Find the right person to love you. One of the signature characteristics of genius is that they like to use their brain during most of their waking hours. In contrast, average people, after a 40-hour workweek, are more likely to want to veg out and turn to mindless activities, for example, cleaning house or enjoying a family game of Monopoly. So, you probably need to find a romantic partner who is very bright and who won't insist that at the 40-hour mark, you turn off your brain.

Dr. Nemko is a career coach specializing in gifted adults and Contributing Editor, Careers, for U.S. News and World Report.

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